

We need rebels to imagine better futures

Ryan Essex

Institute for Lifecourse Development, University of Greenwich

r.w.essex@gre.ac.uk

The impact of dissent, resistance, incivility and indeed rebellion have too often been overlooked in relation to health, so thank you for touching upon these very important issues. History certainly supports these observations. It was almost 38 years ago to the day that staff occupied Hayes Cottage Hospital and Northwood & Pinner Cottage hospital, successfully challenging their closure. Beyond this example, there are countless others. We can trace “agitation” in public health back to the 1800’s (1) and we can see numerous examples of resistance throughout the second world war, from patients and healthcare workers (2). One of the most influential anarchist thinkers of all time, Emma Goldman, was also a nurse. Among her other activities, Goldman went to jail for promoting birth control and reproductive health, a fight that continues to this day. Then there are of course more contemporary examples; Doctors for XR or those in Myanmar leading the campaign against the military government.

While rebellion might simply be seen as a means to act in opposition, such acts are also fundamentally about imagining and pursuing something better. That is, we need rebels to imagine better, just, futures. While such action comes with risks, there are also costs in failing to act, the history of medicine is also littered with examples of complicity with despots and rights abusers.

If we look to history we do not see a case to disobey for the sake of it; history shows us that too often we accept things as they are, too often we accept inequalities, unfair structures, broken systems and the ‘truths’ that perpetuate injustice, too often we accept those small indignities day to day that chip away at health and wellbeing, too often we fail to question authority, too often we fail to question ourselves (3). Our default should not be obedience;

healthcare needs more rebels, such action has had a central role in promoting and protecting health.

References

1. Paterson RG. The Health of Towns Association in Great Britain 1844-1849: An Exposition of the Primary Voluntary Health Society in the Anglo-Saxon Public Health Movement. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 1948;22(4):373-402.
2. Legg PS. The impact of War and occupation in psychiatric hospitals in France 1939 to 1944. 2017. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southampton).
3. Essex R. Resistance in health and healthcare. *Bioethics*. 2021 Jun;35(5):480-6.